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Centred on the source
Hamlets and houses of Kanekes (Baduy)

Introduction

In this contribution we describe and analyse the hamlets and houses of the Urang Kanekes, in the literature often referred to as the Baduy of southern Banten, West Java. Like elsewhere in Indonesia, these structures and the rules to which they are subject are part of the way of life of Kanekes as a whole. We begin, therefore, with a short sketch of the culture of these people to provide the background against which their houses must be understood.

While the Urang Kanekes now occupy a special if not unique place in people’s perceptions of West Java, they originally did not differ much from the

1 The field data for this article were primarily collected by Bart Barendregt in 1998 in the panamping hamlets Curug Seor, Gajeboh, Kadu Keter and some babakan (new settlements) like Belimbing. For practical reasons most time was spent in the hamlet Kadu Ketug, which is known as one of the older of the Kanekes hamlets (Jacobs 1891:45-7). Most current information was obtained here from the late kolot (elder) Kalman who served for six years as the jaro panerentalah (government liaison) of Kanekes and was Barendregt’s host on several visits. The carpenter kolot Ardi, who also built houses in the ‘inner’ hamlets, was asked about specifically architectural matters, information that was supplemented by Mamad, a dedicated local assistant who had visited the ‘inner’ hamlets several times. In 1998 the estimated population of Kanekes as a whole was about 8,000 persons living in 60 hamlets. In 1983 Cisaban, Gajeboh and Kadu Ketug were the largest of these hamlets with respectively 623, 360, and 403 inhabitants (Garna 1988:59). At that time Cibeo was the largest of the tangtu hamlets with 256 inhabitants. These figures can vary considerably, however, as evidenced from earlier sources mentioned by Garna (1988:50-9): hamlets may disappear or population pressure can stimulate part of the people to leave and found a new satellite community (babakan).

2 Much discussion in the literature concerns the proper name for these people who themselves do not use the term Baduy, but rather call themselves after the hamlet or village in which they reside (Von Ende 1889:7; Van Hoëvell 1845:349, note 2; Koorders 1896:336; Veth 1882:129). Since Kanekes is the unit that encompasses their various hamlets, we will use this name both to indicate these people as a group and to speak of their territory (Anonymous 1917:102; Baier 1985:10; Cavanagh 1983:18; Danasasmita and Djatisunda 1986:1; Pennings 1902:371).
people of Banten surrounding them, or more generally from the Sundanese of West Java, of whom they are a subgroup. Indeed, the Sundanese often refer to the practices of the Urang Kanekes as an example of how Sundanese culture should ideally be practiced. The exotic aura that surrounds the Urang Kanekes these days has resulted in part from the fact that since the advent of Islam in West Java and through the colonial and post-colonial eras, they reputedly have maintained the faith and practices of their ancestors. In doing so they have rejected not only Islam, but according to some (Von Ende 1892:100-1; Koolhoven 1932:64; Danasasmita and Djatisunda 1986:4) also the Hinduism and Buddhism of preceding eras, as well as most modern developments such as education, modern agricultural practices and, until recently, money.

It would take us too far afield in this article to go into all the stories concerning the origin of the Urang Kanekes and the reasons for their self-imposed isolation – outsiders were resisted as much as modern developments. Suffice it to say here that both the degree of this isolation and the difference between the Urang Kanekes and those around them have been exaggerated considerably over the years. While Kanekes practices seem to reflect ancient Sundanese religious belief (Agama Sunda Wiwitan), remnants of these are also found elsewhere (compare Wessing 1999c). For instance, the sacred terraces dedicated to the Kanekes ancestors used to be a far more widely spread phenomenon, both in West Java (Van Hoëvell 1845:335-6) and in the rest of the island, and traces of them may still be found in hamlets like the well-known kampung Naga, near Tasikmalaya (Kompas 1989), the lesser-known kampung Dukuh near Garut (Toto Sucipto 1989), and the Kasepuhan settlement on Mount Halimun (Adimihardja 1992). The Kanekes were also not isolated from surrounding peoples, and traces of Islamic and other influences are found in their lives, especially where they do not interfere with the tasks that they must perform (see below) (Danasasmita and Djatisunda 1986:26; Von Ende 1889:9; Van Hoëvell 1845:392; Koolhoven 1932:65, 68).

3 Wessing 1977; Wessing and Barendregt 2003. The Urang Kanekes, on the other hand, refer to everything beyond Kanekes as are, which may refer to both open country or young forest or to the people living there, the Urang Are (Rigg 1862:21; Jacobs and Meijer 1891:128). The latter include especially the Muslim population (Pennings 1902:371; Jacobs and Meijer 1891:11). Implied in are is the idea of infertility (Eringa 1984:34).

4 These stories range from their being refugees from the kingdom of Pajajaran after its defeat by Muslim forces from Banten (Blume 1845; Pennings 1902), to their being a religious community placed there by the ruler (Bakels 1994), to their own claim to have been in Banten since creation and even that they are responsible for the maintenance of the world. Compare Wessing and Barendregt 2005.

5 Bakels 1989; Blume 1845; Danasasmita and Djatisunda 1986; Von Ende 1892; Loebis 2000; Pennings 1902; Pleyte 1905, 1909; De Quant 1899; Van Tricht 1929a, 1929b, 1932. Terraces were also used in the commemoration of venerated Muslims (Eysinga 1841-50:445).